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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001131

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: FRIDAY PRAYERS CANCELED IN PROTEST OF NEW LAW

REF: MANAMA 1091

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Eight political societies, including the boycotting opposition and two somewhat pro-government groups, held a silent protest July 29 against the recently passed Political Societies Law. Leading Shi'a clerics set a precedent by canceling their Friday prayers July 29 in protest against the new law, which they labeled as anti-reform. Youth societies have organized a campaign to amend the section of the law requiring political society members to be at least 21 years old. The Islamiya bloc in parliament vowed to present amendments to the law in the upcoming parliamentary session.

Silent Rally

2. (SBU) Close to 1000 people (RSO estimate) participated in a silent rally in Manama July 29 to protest the Political Societies Law, which was passed by the parliament and ratified by the King one week ago. Eight political societies, including the boycotting opposition and two somewhat pro-government groups, organized the peaceful demonstration. Several of the societies' leaders told the press that the law represents a step backwards in reforms and that it should be either suspended or amended in the next parliamentary session.

3. (SBU) Protesters carried signs against the law, and many wore face masks. Members of the Bahrain Freedom Movement, which is associated with Al Wifaq board member Abduljalil Singace, distributed a strongly-worded statement calling on all civil society organizations to work outside of the law. The statement said that "our religious culture does not allow us to dissolve in injustice, and the Al Khalifa (royal family) evil may prove beneficial in awakening a reorganization in the ranks." The statement also stressed that Bahrain's case should be presented at the Forum for the Future in November.

4. (SBU) According to press reports, the eight societies met July 31 and agreed to send a letter to the King outlining their reservations to the law. They also agreed to form a committee to compare the law to political party laws in other countries. The societies announced that they will hold a seminar on the law on August 25 (to coincide with the anniversary of the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1975).

Friday Prayers Canceled

5. (C) A number of Shi'a clerics, including the most prominent ones, canceled Friday prayers July 29 to protest the Political Societies Law. Al Wifaq chairman Sheikh Ali Salman, Al Wifaq board member Hassan Mushaima, and Hussein Al Najati stated publicly that they were canceling the prayers to express dissatisfaction with the new law. Several sources told EmbOffs that they had never heard of a cleric canceling Friday prayers for political reasons in Bahrain or any other country, and some thought the move was highly offensive to Islam.

MPs Pledge to Amend the Law

6. (SBU) Several columnists wrote pieces against the law, including Al Wasat editor Mansour Al Jamry. Al Jamry lamented that the opposition had sacrificed its influence in parliament by boycotting the 2002 elections, thereby allowing the Political Societies Law and other restrictive measures to be passed. He called on the opposition to cooperate with reform-minded MPs and to participate in the 2006 elections. MP Mohamed Al Abbas, spokesman of the Islamiya (Shi'a) bloc in parliament, told the press that his bloc would propose amendments to the law in the next parliamentary session and

would seek to change the name to the Political Parties Law. Oppositionist National Democratic Action Society member Ibrahim Sharif told the press he was not confident that amendments could be made in parliament, as the appointed Shura Council would have to approve them.

Youth Societies Express Concern

17. (SBU) According to press reports, a number of youth societies met July 30 to discuss the article in the law that increases the minimum age requirement for participation in political societies from 18 to 21. Several of the societies are planning to write a letter to the King asking him to amend the law. Representatives from two youth societies stated publicly that they would not join the other societies in demanding changes to the law because they believe youth should be concerned with social and cultural issues, not politics. A youth leader told the press August 1 that youth committees of political societies were considering establishing themselves as independent entities that would not be under the Political Societies Law.

Comment

18. (C) Demands to amend the Political Societies Law have backing by some members of parliament and the Shura Council (reftel). There is little chance that the King will respond to demands made directly to him, as he expects the law to be dealt with by the parliament. When parliament reconvenes in October after the summer break, there will likely be initiatives to change the controversial law. Until then, it is unclear how much the opposition will use the issue to increase tension with the government.

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